

The Quest of the Female Artist: Suicide as Subversive Art in *The Awakening*

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Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) follows the quest of the female artist through its protagonist Edna Pontellier, ending with her great work of art – in effect, her suicide. Vacationing on Grand Isle, Edna submerges herself in a largely female community, (re)claiming her sexuality in her intimacy with the ideal mother-woman Adele Ratignolle and in the music of the reclusive, self-governing Mademoiselle Reisz. When Edna returns home, she becomes further disinterested in her position as mother and housewife. To foster her heightened self-awareness and emerging subjectivity, she wanders the city alone, takes a lover, seeks out aesthetic truths, fantasizes about the absent Robert, and eventually moves into a cottage by herself to paint.

I use a feminist critical approach to argue that Edna's mobility enables resistance to patriarchal oppression, tracing her fluid subjectivity from female community to man's home to solitary cottage so that the journey itself is important as a representation of Edna's emerging selfhood. Edna's quest consists of the following steps over a nine-month period: leaving the home, a female sexual encounter projected onto a male love interest, a rejection of patriarchy in the form of Christianity followed by the rejection of a selfless life in the form of motherhood, and the creation of a work of art. According to patriarchal ideology, there is no female intellectual inheritance, no place for the independent, sexual female artist. Hence, Edna's newfound subjectivity cannot exist under patriarchy, and her final work of art – her suicide – is subversive artwork representative of what Edna as artist observes in society.